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Editorial: Snooping on the job

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Murphy Painter resigned from his long-time position as commissioner of Alcohol and Tobacco Control last summer amid accusations that he had stalked and sexually harassed a former assistant.

But now the state inspector general says that Mr. Painter was involved in other improper activities on the job: using state law enforcement databases to gather information about public officials and private citizens.

His targets included Sen. David Vitter's wife, Wendy Vitter, WAFB-TV reporter Keitha Nelson and Tommy Hodson, a former Louisiana State University quarterback, according to investigators. In all, Mr. Painter made more than 1,150 improper inquiries between February 2005 and August 2010, the report said -- the majority of them about women.

Mr. Painter denies looking up information about Ms. Vitter, Mr. Hodson and Ms. Nelson and says that any use of the databases was for legitimate law enforcement purposes. But the report notes that 63 percent of his 1,880 searches involved people who are not regulated by his agency.

It's hard to understand why those actions didn't land him in trouble. The Louisiana State Police twice admonished Mr. Painter's agency about improper use of the system, first in 2001 and again in 2008, after audits revealed the activity.

But while Mr. Painter told State Police he would correct the problems, the report says that within his agency, he "remained defiant, telling his staff, 'F---the State Police. We have not been audited for eight years. I'll be gone from here before they ever come back again'."

It turns out he was right about that.

But the findings of State Police audits and his lack of compliance with State Police demands didn't result in any consequences for Mr. Painter, and that's disturbing.

His alleged abuse of the databases came to light after his former assistant, Kelli Suire, complained about him to the state inspector general last August. Four days later, he resigned at the request of the governor's office from the post he had held for 14 years.

The inspector general's office got search warrants after Ms. Suire's complaint and took computers and thumb drives from Mr. Painter's office and state-provided car.

A preliminary review of the state computer system showed that Mr. Painter had sought information on Ms. Suire the same month she filed her complaint and also on her attorney, an investigator said at the time.

But according to the inspector general, Mr. Painter's reconnaissance went far beyond his accuser. "Mr. Painter abused these confidential law enforcement databases on a colossal scale, illegally accessing citizens' private and restricted information," Inspector General Stephen Street said.

It's a relief that Mr. Painter is no longer in a position to get access to that information. But the inspector general's report says that his actions appear to violate federal and state laws against computer tampering and release of personal information for motor vehicle records.

That warrants further scrutiny by East Baton Rouge District Attorney Hillar Moore and U.S. Attorney Donald Cazayoux.

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